

A Moment in Time

December 1, 2013

The Last Dance

A Conversation with Rev. Duane Everson

Category: Non-Fiction

Rev. Duane Everson served forty five years in Minnesota congregations as a Lutheran Pastor (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). He is a graduate of Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, Westburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, and was ordained in 1967. Rev. Everson served as a Pastor at St. Peter's Church in Northfield for 12 years.

Steven James Beto (sjb): Reverend Everson, You don't need to mention names, but you said that you presided over a funeral that had a unique kind of a finish. Can you tell me more about that, please?

Rev. Duane Everson (RDE): I don't see why I wouldn't want to mention Dan Freeman. Everyone knows Dan Freeman.

Sjb: Quite the man, I'm told.

RDE: Yes, indeed. He was a good friend of mine for many years. Dan was raised in Northfield and was looked upon as 'Mister Northfield,' a man who was dedicated to the community. Among many other things, Dan was an actor with the Arts Guild and appeared in many plays. Dan was raised by Lydia and Sid Freeman—a good, Jewish family. After he married a woman of the Lutheran faith, Dan and she became members of St. Peter's where I served as Pastor, and Dan referred to himself as 'Jew-theran.' He liked that.

Sjb: Jew-theran?

RDE: Yes, celebrating both his Jewish and his new found Lutheran traditions. Sadly, Dan died at too young an age.

Sjb: How old was he when he passed away?

RDE: We were about the same age—seventy-three? Dan had three children: Jeff, Nate, and Suzie, and I was asked to preside over Dan's funeral at the Valley Grove Church, that historical church there on the highway; it's on the Historical Registry. Dan supported the church—one of the many things he supported. His daughter, Suzie, is an actress out in California and has been on a few television programs, and she put together a service for her dad as though it was a stage production. I was a little concerned about it at first because I wanted to respect Dan's Jewish and Lutheran backgrounds, but it turned out beautifully.

On the cover of the bulletin, there was Dan wearing a Top Hat with his head tipped, and it said, “The Last Dance. Produced by Sid and Lydia Freeman.” When you opened the bulletin, you discovered that Dan’s children and grandchildren were the characters in the play, and I was “The Master of Ceremonies.”

Sjb: The funeral was created to be something quite unique.

RDE: Yes, and they had a large picture of Dan in front wearing his Top Hat, and I came out wearing a suit and a Top Hat tilted to one side, and I said, “Take a close, quick look because this Top Hat is only going to be on my head for three seconds. I won’t embarrass you any longer than that, nor will I be embarrassed any longer than that, but I’m sure not going to let—and I pointed to Dan’s picture—I’m sure not going to let that guy get ahead of me.” And, with that began the funeral. Another friend of mine, Mike Leming, a Professor of Sociology at St. Olaf’s later wrote: Rev. Duane Everson puts the ‘Fun’ back in ‘Fun-erals.’

Throughout the ceremony, I played on a theme. I remembered a song with a line: If you get a chance, don’t sit it out, dance. During the homily and the entire service, I repeated: If you get a chance, don’t sit it out, dance, and here, I was picking up the notes that in life, Dan was not a wall-flower. He didn’t sit it out; not Dan. He got on the dance floor and he danced a big dance all through his life, and he had a positive, wonderful effect on a lot of people. If you get a chance, don’t sit it out, dance.

During the Benediction at the end of the service, I repeated the phrase to emphasis the theme: *The Last Dance* and I sat down to listen to the music coming from the balcony—string music, nice and upbeat music, and a gentleman stood up and asked Dan’s sister to dance, and together they began dancing in the aisle arm in arm, then I got up and asked Dan’s ex-wife, Gretchen, to dance, and within thirty seconds, Steve, the entire congregation—and this place was packed—is dancing.

Sjb: My goodness.

RDE: Everyone in the congregation was dancing! They couldn’t get everyone in the aisle, in the chancel, so they were dancing between the pews! Completely spontaneous—I was just in awe. It was fun. It was a fun day.

Sjb: More than fun, Reverend. It was remarkable.

RDE: My first thought was, what would the old preachers of a hundred years ago say?

Sjb: They were dancing that day, Reverend.

RDE: I hope so. We attend funerals, you know, not because someone has died, but because someone has lived.

Addendum: The entire funeral can be viewed on the Website: www.vimeo.com under the title ‘Dan Freeman Funeral.’

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The Last Grand Dance

By John Fredrickson

Life is great, life is grand and life is like a dance floor
 You are a dancer and the dance floor is the world
The dance is like a river, one that never ends
 Eternal life is life left to chance other than fate
The chance that this dance will never end
 Life an endless river that will never end like the last
Dance that we all share eternally in bonds and friendship
 May the last dance last forever.